

## "The Fundamental Truths of the Film Remain": Researching Individual Reception of Holocaust Films

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Holocaust; film  
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**Abstract:** In this article I will discuss empirical approaches to viewers' reception of films about the Holocaust. Existing studies tend to focus on the effects of, or responses to, one film or to one type of film, which results in skewed ideas about "Holocaust films" and their audiences. I will present a qualitative study of individual reception of feature films about the Holocaust I conducted in Britain, and demonstrate how a comparison of the reception of different films and genres can add to our understanding of their interpretation and impact. Differences and similarities in responses to feature films based on fictional narratives on the one hand and on "true stories" on the other hand, will be highlighted, while also taking into account viewers' interpretative communities. I will show that films based on true stories, especially if shot in a realist style, added more measurably to historical knowledge and understanding than those based on fiction, with the latter tending to be judged to different standards of authenticity. While viewers appeared to be able to recognise if a film is not primarily based on fact, they still expected a Holocaust film to be "true" in other ways.

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## 1. Introduction

"It [the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*<sup>1</sup>] made me feel more compassionate towards both sides in this kind of issue between maybe Jews and Germans, although I'm only using those kind of terms to, to categorise ... if anything, I've taken away ... a grander understanding of not just the Jewish people and the problems they faced but the German people and the problems that they faced, too, and then these things coming together" (Peter, 26, dance practitioner)

The popularity of feature films about the Holocaust often eludes, or discourages, academic audiences and critics who might instead favour realist, experimental, or documentary modes. Indeed, as Peter's words above suggest, a film such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* can have a powerful impact and one not necessarily supported by historical evidence, nor desired by educators. Michael GRAY's (2011) research into pupil preconceptions about the Holocaust prior to formal education about the subject, revealed pupils' widespread familiarity with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. He notes that "somewhat discouragingly, none of the pupils had ever seen either Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* or Stephen [sic] Spielberg's *Schindler's List*" (pp.15-16).<sup>2</sup> In similar fashion, the Centre for Holocaust Education (CfHE) explored pupils' responses to one film, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, as a part of their latest study on pupils' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust (FOSTER et al., 2016). Films, which are based entirely on fiction are, therefore, particularly contested. [1]

And yet, only few empirical studies have sought to explore how ordinary, actual viewers—rather than "ideal readers" or critics and academics—make sense of documentary and feature films about the Holocaust, which otherwise are the subject of a prolific field of research within Holocaust studies. There is a significant body of work, which variably condemns or praises the assumed impact of films on Holocaust memory, knowledge, and consciousness (AVISAR, 1988, p.129; INSDORF, 2003, p.xix; LOSHITZKY, 1997, p.3). How "actual audiences" in the present make sense of these films, has remained largely elusive (BÖSCH, 2007, p.1). This is in part due to the predominance of Frankfurt School approaches to representation,<sup>3</sup> in which "audiences and users of media are seen

1 *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (USA/UK, 2008) was directed by Mark HERMAN, and is based on the best-selling novel of the same name by John BOYNE (2006). The film focuses on Bruno (the son of a concentration and death camp commandant) who befriends a Jewish inmate (of the camp), Shmuel, and Bruno's mother, who eventually finds out about the camp's true purpose. After Bruno has sneaked into the camp to help his friend, the film ends with the killing of both boys in the gas chamber, and Bruno's parents' despair about their son's death.

2 *The Pianist* (France/Poland/Germany/UK, 2002) was directed by Roman POLANSKI, and is based on Władysław SZPIGLMAN's memoir (2000 [1946]) about his survival in Warsaw. *Schindler's List* (USA, 1993) was directed by Steven Spielberg, and is based on Thomas KENEALLY's novel "Schindler's Ark" (1982) about German industrialist Oskar Schindler, who saved the lives of 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust.

3 The Frankfurt School is associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), which was established in 1923, forced into exile by the Nazis after 1933, and returned to Frankfurt in 1951. Its scholars, who founded Critical Theory, included Erich FROMM, Max HORKHEIMER, Herbert MARCUSE, Walter BENJAMIN, Leo LOWENTHAL, and Theodor ADORNO. ADORNO's dictum that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" has exerted much influence on research on the representation of the Holocaust in popular culture (2003 [1949], p.162).

as the powerless victims of mass seduction" due to "the economics of cultural production that result in cultural products that pander to the lowest common denominator of taste" (SCHRØDER, DROTNER, KLINE & MURRAY, 2003, p.40). In addition, Holocaust representations tend to be studied from the perspectives, and with the methodologies, of history, literature, or film studies rather than of media and communication studies or the social sciences more broadly speaking. Conversely, the field of audience reception research has largely ignored films about historical events in general, including films about the Holocaust and other genocides or mass violence. [2]

The CfHE study is part of a small and growing body of qualitative and quantitative approaches to Holocaust film reception. They tend to concentrate on responses to only one film or one type/genre of film. In this article, I will briefly review such empirical research into the reception of "Holocaust films" (Section 2), before evaluating an exploratory, empirical qualitative reception study I conducted in Britain. I will begin by discussing the study design, including theoretical framework, methodology for data collection and analysis, the films selected for the study, interviews and sampling, and the study's British context (Section 3). This will be followed by presenting results, which are supported by examples from the qualitative study (Section 4). [3]

As it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all findings, I will focus on how the study's comparative approach—comparing responses to different films and film types—can provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of individual reception of films about the Holocaust. I will address the following questions: if, and how, the reception of Holocaust films based on fictional narratives and films based on "true stories" differ from one another, and what are the potential consequences for historical understanding? How, and to what extent, is the reception of such films influenced by viewers' various interpretative communities? And finally, what do viewers remember about Holocaust films in the long-term? Given the particular popularity of films based entirely on fiction, these are pressing issues. Omer BARTOV, for one, maintains that

"the lay public is most likely to be exposed to those historical interpretations least likely to offer a reliable representation of the past, yet would be prone to take precisely such stories at face value because they would be presented as the culmination of scholarly research" (1997, p.57). [4]

I will conclude by reflecting on the study's limitations, make recommendations for further research, and consider what can be gained from empirical approaches to Holocaust film reception (Section 5). [5]

## 2. Empirical Approaches to Holocaust Film Reception

As mentioned above, the study of films and documentaries about the Holocaust has so far remained largely sheltered from developments in other disciplines, which have researched actual audiences (e.g., HOOPER-GREENHILL, 2000). Historical studies into the reception of newsreels, film and television programmes about the Holocaust focus on the public sphere, including newspapers and politics, or reconstruct the reception of historical audiences, for example, through letters and other ego-documents (CHAPMAN, 2011; COLE, 2013; FRANK, 2007; HAGGITH, 2005; PERRA, 2010; PETERSEN, 2001; REILLY, 1998; THIELE, 2001). [6]

There are three main types of empirical studies, to which Holocaust film reception is either central or peripheral: studies, which investigate the effects of a TV series, documentary, or feature film on viewers; studies into memory transmission and historical consciousness, and the different sources—including film—feeding into memory and historical consciousness; and studies into individual reception of films in terms of reception processes and interpretations of the history represented in them. [7]

Most existing studies are of the "effects" type and usually apply quantitative methods. The watershed event of broadcasting the TV series *Holocaust*<sup>4</sup> was likely the first instance that prompted a larger number of generally quantitative surveys of its reach and impact, especially in West Germany, but also other countries (ERNST, 1980; HORMUTH & STEPHAN, 1981; MÄRTHESHEIMER & FRENZEL, 1979; WEICHERT, 1980; WILKE, 2004).<sup>5</sup> More recently, German media psychologists (BAUMERT, HOFMANN & BLUM, 2008; HOFMANN, BAUMERT & SCHMITT, 2005) conducted two systematic quantitative studies of the effects of the films *Downfall* and *My Führer* on German audiences.<sup>6</sup> Researchers' interest was not limited to feature films. Several studies also focused on the effects of a range of documentaries (DOHLE, WIRTH &

4 The TV series *Holocaust*(USA, 1978) was an NBC production directed by Marvin CHOMSKY, which told the story of the fictional German Jewish family Weiss.

5 Prior to the studies about the reception of *Holocaust*, market research and polling institute Infratest conducted some audience research in Germany in the early 1960s, in response to TV programmes about the "Third Reich" (KANSTEINER, 2004). For surveys about audience responses to *Holocaust* in Britain, see BBC Written Archives, R9/792/446, Viewing Report VR/78/446, "An Audience Response Report. A Study of British Viewers' Reactions to 'Holocaust'", November 1978. Among the conclusions of the *Holocaust* surveys was that aesthetic criticism of the series tended to be politically motivated and correlate with anti-Semitic attitudes, lower education, and apolitical attitudes. Viewers assigned the series a high degree of authenticity, and its feature film plot led to the personalisation and individualisation of National Socialist crimes.

6 *Downfall* (Germany/Italy/Austria, 2004) was directed by Oliver HIRSCHBIEGEL, and was partly based on Joachim FEST's book of the same name, and the memoir of Adolf HITLER's secretary, Traudl JUNGE (both published 2002); *My Führer* (Germany, 2007) is a comedy/satire directed by Daniel LEVY. The study into *Downfall*, for example, concluded that the film had some significant effects on the viewers, including stronger identification with national symbols, objections to sanctions against Germany, and decreased negative emotions towards Hitler. To account for these effects, participants' demographic backgrounds and their personalities, for example, their ability to be empathetic, or their attitudes towards authoritarianism, had to be considered, and were measured through questionnaires.

VORDERER, 2003; FINGER & WAGNER, 2014; KOPF-BECK, GAISBAUER & DENGLE, 2013). In the German context, studies focus less on how films are interpreted and more on the degree to which they effect viewers' acceptance of historical responsibility and rejection of National Socialism and anti-Semitism in the present. [8]

This type of research has highlighted the links between political attitudes, emotions, and film reception. It succeeds in demonstrating how powerful the impact of a film can be, especially in a setting as highly politicised as that of post-war Germany and its complex relationship to the Nazi past, at least in the short term. What it could not tell us was how people interpret the history represented by the films, and how film reception works on the individual level. Whether using quantitative or qualitative approaches, and despite taking into account personalities and demographic backgrounds, studies of the first type tend to conceptualise viewers as more or less passive receivers of media messages. [9]

Studies of the "memory" type are decidedly qualitative in their methodological approach. Here, films are but one aspect of the overall study or research findings (e.g., WELZER, MOLLER & TSCHUGGNALL, 2002; WINEBURG, 2001). Anna READING (2005), in her study of young Polish, British and US American people's memory of the Holocaust, which in part draws on 54 qualitative interviews, concludes that "personal encounters with survivors, teachers or family members were generally much more important than film and television for young people's acquisition of Holocaust memory and knowledge" (p.213). As their concern is with memory rather than film reception *per se*, *these* insightful studies raise a different set of questions. They cannot establish how individuals acquire knowledge and memory of the Holocaust through film, to the extent of adding to their own autobiographical memory. [10]

Finally, studies of the "reception" type, which ask how people make sense of films about the Holocaust, and other historical events and periods, are few and far between (e.g., MONK, 2011). This is because film studies and film history tend to privilege textual analysis, from which assumptions about audience reception are derived. A notable contribution to this third type of research, though not in relation to films about the Holocaust, was made by Christian GUDEHUS, Stewart ANDERSON and David KELLER (2010). They conducted a study into individual reception strategies in response to the film *Hotel Rwanda*,<sup>7</sup> for which they interviewed 41 people from the United States and Germany after they had been provided with a copy of the film to watch at home. They found, among other things, that viewers' responses to the same film can be highly varied, and that the reception is affected by preconceptions, styles of narration, and personalities. More recently, the aforementioned CfHE sub-study into the impact of the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* conducted focus groups in English schools with 44 girls and boys between the age of 8 and 13. Among the conclusions was that the

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7 *Hotel Rwanda* (USA, 2005) is a film directed by Terry GEORGE about hotelier Paul RUSESABAGINA, who saved the lives of more than one thousand people during the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

film has the potential to reinforce misconceptions about the Holocaust (FOSTER et al., 2016). [11]

The latter studies are a welcome development and provide important insights. Their focus on only one film, however, leaves crucial questions unanswered, such as whether their findings apply to other films too, and the role played by genre and aesthetics, or viewers' backgrounds. My study, which also belongs to the "reception" type, was designed as qualitative, focusing on a country other than Germany, and using five different films to explore which parts of individual reception are linked to a specific film text or mode of representation, and which elements constitute a more general aspect of film reception. [12]

### **3. Making Sense of Holocaust Representations: A Qualitative Reception Study of Audience Responses to Recent Films**

#### **3.1 Theoretical framework**

The time-consuming, potentially costly nature of empirical research, and the suspicion with which conclusions drawn from relatively small sets of interviews or responses to surveys are often regarded, adds to the aforementioned marginalisation of such approaches within Holocaust studies. The studies discussed above demonstrate the feasibility of, and need for, inter-disciplinary approaches for the study of Holocaust film reception. My research project looked particularly to British cultural studies to provide the intellectual basis for a qualitative audience reception study, which in turn could open up further research in Holocaust studies. Unlike the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory, British cultural studies (Birmingham School) does not regard the audience as passive and homogenous, but understands it as an active audience—or rather active audiences—with differing readings and interpretations of the various representations of the Holocaust. Stuart HALL is among those who correctly criticise mass communication research for its linear concept of communication, highlighting that encoding and decoding need not necessarily coincide. HALL asserts that there nonetheless is a hegemonic culture with "dominant or preferred meanings" (1996 [1980], p.134). Following on from this, it is now held that "reception processes" are "simultaneously individual and communal" because meanings are at once due to a particular socialisation and to interpretative communities which suggests some stability in meaning (SCHRØDER et al., 2003, p.132; see also KEPPLER, 2001). [13]

There are also commonalities with Janet STAIGER's (2000) work on spectatorship. Her historical materialist approach turns away from textual analysis, and stresses the importance of contextual factors for audiences' experiences: "These contexts involve intertextual knowledges (including norms of how to interpret sense data from moving images and sounds), personal psychologies, and sociological dynamics" (p.1). While STAIGER concentrates on historical audiences rather than viewers in the present, her notion of "interpretative strategies" is particularly useful for the present study and supports the concept of an active audience (p.30). [14]

### 3.2 Methodology

I used a mixed methods approach (e.g., HANSEN, COTTLE, NEGRINE & NEWBOLD, 1998; KELLE, 2014; KELLNER, 1997), which combined textual film analysis (which is largely excluded from discussion here due to the limited scope of this article), qualitative research methodologies (individual and group interviews), and elements of quantitative research (questionnaire and computer-assisted analysis). This approach was thought to be most suitable and flexible to gain insights into the participants' thoughts about these and other films, their reception and interpretative strategies and resources, and the ways in which they made sense of visual representations of the Holocaust. The possibility of a quantitative survey was ruled out. While questionnaire-based research allows for a larger number of participants and can lead to important insights, it "does not usually allow space for an on-going, in-depth investigation of attitudes and opinions" (HANSEN et al., 1998, p.232). The limitations of conducting qualitative research projects include the small number of interviews, due to the time and labour consuming processes of interviewing, transcribing, and analysing, self-selective samples, and the often regional focus of studies further limiting general conclusions (JENSEN, 2009, p.10). Generalisations can nonetheless be made based on empirical, qualitative research. Not in terms of representativeness, but studies may have "wide-ranging, 'general' implications for how we think about media influences" (SCHRØDER et al., 2003, p.126). [15]

For data collection and analysis, I followed a grounded theory approach, which largely disclaims hypotheses and generates them by permanently analysing the material and to develop theories only when the hypotheses can be verified in the data. This approach was deemed most appropriate for this project due to the small number of comparable studies and due to its explorative character. Grounded theory analysis begins at the time of data collection to guide the interviews and to ensure that all relevant observations are incorporated into the ongoing collection of data (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990). Cultural values, political tendencies, social movements and economic conditions are regarded as a broader societal context that influences and determines the phenomena under examination, which are incorporated into theory development (FLICK, 1991). One of the central elements of grounded theory methodology (GTM) is the use of "constant comparisons" in order "to explore variations, similarities and differences in data" (HALLBERG, 2006, p.143). This study was informed, in particular, by the constructivist approach as developed by Kathy CHARMAN (2006) which criticises the positivism of traditional GTM. Constructivist GTM understands "that interaction is inherently dynamic and interpretative and addresses how people create, enact, and change meanings and actions" (p.7). [16]

While GTM provides useful and effective techniques for collecting data and building theory from the ground up, it is vague on the steps of analysis. To fill this gap, for the process of coding the interviews and building categories, I adopted hermeneutic dialogue analysis (HDA) as the interpretative approach to establish analytical categories, which focuses on interactions and on the situations in which

the contributions by participants or interviewers occur. During the time of data collection, four "interpretation group sessions" were conducted, during which analytical categories were established inductively by examining exemplary case studies (JENSEN, 2000). That means that an interview was selected and each sequence to be examined was analysed following seven steps: contextualising the sequence; paraphrasing of what is said; the speaker's intention; interactions and the role of the interaction; the speaker's motive(s) and unintentional expressions; the preceding communication (if applicable); and general relationships and connections to theories. [17]

HDA is particularly useful for a detailed analysis of interview data, but the time-consuming nature of this method makes it infeasible to analyse every interview in this way when dealing with a larger set of data. For this reason, I subsequently utilised the categories and perspectives resulting (or "induced") from the detailed examination of several case studies to search and analyse the remaining data (JENSEN, 2004, pp.60-62). During this process, the induced categories can still be extended, reduced, dismissed, or revised (MAYRING, 2000, §12). Olaf JENSEN (2000, §20) describes this approach as a combination of GTM and qualitative content analysis as developed by Philipp MAYRING (2000). In other words, it presents a more pragmatic approach to establishing categories (JENSEN, 2004, p.59). [18]

I transcribed all interviews using the transcription software Express Scribe Pro (NCH Software). The transcription partially adopted transcription guidelines issued by the Freie Universität Berlin's [Center für digitale Systeme](#) for the Visual History Archive, including how to record change in speakers, simultaneous speaking, comments, non-verbal/para-verbal expressions, interruptions or background noise and distinctive speech, incomprehensible words, sequences, and pauses, and abruption of a word or train of thought (WOGGON, 2009).<sup>8</sup> [19]

The production and use of transcripts is not without its challenges. It is a very time-consuming process but one that "can bring a much closer appreciation of the meanings in the data, and this is often the time at which ideas for coding ... arise, as well as ideas for topics to pursue in subsequent interviews" (SEALE, 2000, p.207). Transcripts also allow for easy searching of the data. At the same time, transcripts can add costs or delays to a research project, and nuances, including intonation, speed, hesitation, etc., may get lost in the process. Even with the greatest effort, a transcript "can never fully reproduce all of the

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8 Change in speakers: \ ... \\\

Simultaneous speaking: || ... |||

Comments, non-verbal/para-verbal expressions, interruptions or background noise, and distinctive speech: < ... >

Incomprehensible words or sequences: (...)

Abruption of a word: -.

Abruption of a train of thought: \_.

Pauses: one second (-); two seconds (--); three seconds (---); four seconds (4); etc.

Italics for film or book titles.



dimensions of the 'live' interview" (EVERS, 2011, §24). To remedy this situation, I therefore based the analysis on both transcript and recording to reflect nuances in tone, speed, and emotion of the interviewees that may not be fully represented in the transcripts. The qualitative analysis of the data detailed above was assisted by using qualitative data analysis (QDA) software NVivo, which enables coding of the data, recording of the individual steps of analysis and the quick comparison of data (MAYRING, 2000, §19). The use of QDA software was decided due to the large amount of data and because it "serves to facilitate an accurate and transparent data analysis process whilst also providing a quick and simple way of counting who said what and when, which in turn, provides a reliable, general picture of the data" (WELSH, 2002, §4).

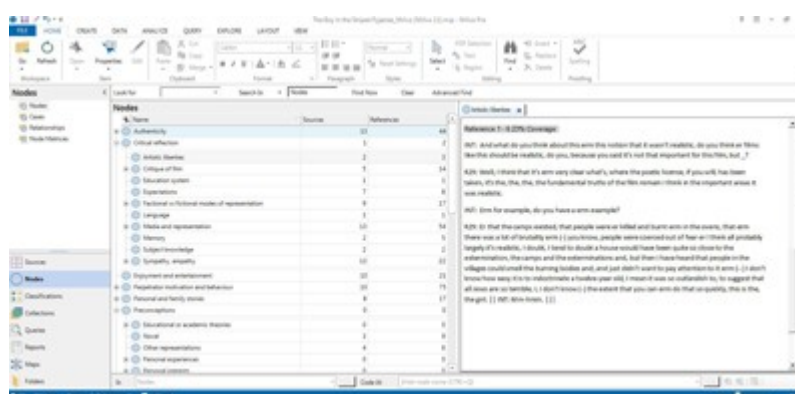


Illustration 1: NVivo-assisted analysis. Please click [here](#) for an enlarged version of Illustration 1. [20]

### 3.3 Film selection

Central to the present study is a comparative approach to explore the relationship between viewers, film text, and extra- and intertextual factors. To achieve this, I selected five films which attained different levels of critical and commercial success. They were released between 2000 and 2010, represent diverse genres, and which are based on fiction or on actual events. As the study's focus is on Britain, all five are English-language films and (co-) produced in the UK or US: *Conspiracy*; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*; *The Reader*; *Defiance*; and *The Grey Zone*. [21]

The only TV film and docu-drama in the film selection is critically acclaimed and award-winning *Conspiracy* (UK/USA, 2001), produced by BBC/HBO Films, which was directed by Frank PIERSON. It sets out to recreate the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942,<sup>9</sup> and is based on the minutes that remain from

9 What has become known as the Wannsee Conference was a meeting of fifteen senior National Socialist officials from the SS, the party and the civilian ministries on 20 January 1942 in a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee, to discuss "the total solution of the Jewish question in Europe". See Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, "Ermächtigungsschreiben von Hermann Göring an Heydrich vom 31. Juli 1941", LVAA Riga, P1026, opis 1, B 3, Bl. 164, [http://www.ghwk.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf-wannsee/dokumente/goerings\\_beauftragung\\_heydrich\\_juli1941\\_barrierefrei.pdf](http://www.ghwk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-wannsee/dokumente/goerings_beauftragung_heydrich_juli1941_barrierefrei.pdf) [Accessed: May 5, 2017]. The minutes of the meeting, also called the Wannsee Protocol, were found by staff of the American prosecutor at the German Foreign Office when they were collecting information for

the meeting to which the film adds its own interpretation of the event. The aforementioned *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (USA/UK, 2008), Mark HERMAN's film adaptation of John BOYNE'S best-selling 2006 novel of the same name, achieved high box-office results in the UK and internationally. The film depicts the fictitious and unlikely friendship of Bruno, the son of a concentration and death camp commandant, and Shmuel, a Jewish boy who is an inmate of this camp. The award-winning *The Reader* (USA/Germany, 2008), based on Bernhard SCHLINK's best-selling fiction novel "*Der Vorleser*" ["The Reader"] (1995), was directed by Stephen DALDRY. Focusing on protagonist Michael's discovery that Hanna, the woman with whom he had an affair as a teenage boy, had been a concentration camp guard in Auschwitz who is also illiterate. It is a drama about post-war justice and Germany's coming to terms with the National Socialist past, especially among the second generation. *Defiance* (USA, 2008) was directed by Edward ZWICK. The film is set in Belarus in 1941/42 and based on the book "*Defiance: The True Story of the Bielski Partisans*" by Nechama TEC (1993). It was successful at the box office and received Oscar and Golden Globe nominations, and won a couple of awards. *Defiance* dramatises the survival of a group of 1,200 Jewish refugees and partisans, led by the brothers Tuvia, Zus and Asael BIELSKI, in the Belorussian forests during the Second World War. Finally, the economically unsuccessful *The Grey Zone* (USA, 2001), initially a play, was directed by Tim Blake NELSON as a film primarily about the human condition. It is based on multiple sources, most prominently a memoir written by Miklos NYISZLI (2012 [1960]) and an essay by Primo LEVI (1989 [1986]), along with manuscripts buried by members of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz, the Jewish inmates forced to work in the crematoria (BEZWINSKA & CZECH, 1973). Set in one of the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the film focuses on the survival of the gas by one girl, the attempt to save her life, and the twelfth *Sonderkommando*'s uprising in October 1944. [22]

### 3.4 Interviews and sampling

The study was designed to capture the immediate responses of interviewees to the films to ensure a degree of consistency and provide a basis for comparison. I therefore spent several hours with the interviewee(s) for the joint film viewing and subsequent interview (on average, three to four hours in total). Before the film screening, interviewees received a participant information sheet that detailed the project's purpose, rationale and method. Following the film viewing, interviewees completed a short questionnaire that contained demographic as well as general and film-specific questions, asking, for example, where knowledge about the Holocaust was obtained, what the participants expect from a film about this topic, and which other Holocaust films or documentaries they had seen. [23]

This was followed by a semi-structured individual or group interview (HANSEN et al., p.257), which was recorded with the participants' consent. I loosely followed an interview guide, which ensured some consistency and flow to the interviews. The questions on the guide can be arranged into three groups: questions specific

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the Nuremberg Trials. Despite the use of euphemisms, the Wannsee Protocol clearly reveals that the killing of all Jews was aimed for.

to the individual film the interviewee(s) watched (e.g., film characters, memorable scenes); general film questions (e.g., about other Holocaust films); and questions about interviewees' knowledge about, and interest in the Holocaust (e.g., Holocaust education). The interviews always began with the same question asking for a summary of the film to "break the ice" and to explore what the interviewees remembered about the film, and which aspects seemed important to them. I encouraged the interviewees to continue speaking through para- and non-verbal expressions, and through guiding or follow-up questions. [24]

Interviewees' approaches varied widely. While many responded to questions in length, others only provided short answers for each question without much "free" talk, and some tended towards associative talking and dominating the interview with their own interests. The approach to individual and group interview was the same. Group interviews were conducted to gauge how peer-to-peer conversations (friends, students, family) about the film affect the reception of Holocaust films. Depending on the individuals in a given group and their relationship to one another, some group interviews took the form of engaged, sometimes even heated discussion among the group. In others, the conversation resembled an individual interview in that interaction among group members remained limited and largely focused on me as the interviewer. The interview duration varied; on average, individual interviews lasted between 30 to 40 minutes and group interviews between 40 to 60 minutes. I conducted all interviews between March 2011 and May 2012, predominantly in Leicester, England, mostly in rooms booked at the University of Leicester. Altogether, I recorded around 36 hours of interview material. [25]

My study aimed to explore British responses to recent Holocaust films, and used purposive sampling (BRYMAN, 2004), aiming for at least 10 British interviewees per film. Within these broad parameters, however, recruitment of interviewees relied on convenience sampling, using the university's email bulletin, adverts in local newsagents, museums and post offices in Leicester, and through word-of-mouth and local contacts who aided with the recruitment of participants. People from countries other than Britain who volunteered were also included in the study. In total, I interviewed 68 people in 37 individual interviews and 11 group interviews. Of these 68, 52 were British (most identified as British, but the majority of them were English), one Northern Irish, six German, four Greek-Cypriot, two Spanish, one French, one Czech, and one US-American. Around half of them responded to adverts, and the other half were recruited with the help of local contacts and snowballing. The former group presumably has a stronger interest in the subject. Among the British interviewees, around sixty per cent were female. Also at sixty per cent was the portion of those aged 18-35. In terms of occupation, seventeen were students, four retired, one unemployed, and the remainder professionals. Seventy per cent held a BA or higher. 75 per cent identified their ethnicity as White (mostly as White British), two as Jewish, three as Indian, one as Chinese, and six as 'Mixed', while one did not provide an answer. Politically, around sixty per cent identified as, broadly defined, left-liberal. [26]

Thirteen people were interviewed about the film *Conspiracy* (11 Britons, one Spanish, one US American), 18 about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (ten Britons, six Germans, one Northern Irish, and one Spanish), 11 about *The Reader* (ten Britons, one Czech), 15 about *Defiance* (ten Britons, one French, and four Greek Cypriots), and 11 about *The Grey Zone* (all Britons). The interview analysis focussed on the British participants, but the responses of other interviewees were also taken into account. [27]

### 3.5 A note on the British context

National identity and history form an important "interpretative community" for the reception of films, in which particular "inherited stories and memory practices socially agreed by their family and community" are internalised as a way of "making sense of themselves in relation to the wider world" (READING, 2005, p.213). As noted above, most existing studies focus on Germany, arguably a highly politicised research setting. Talking about Holocaust films without also talking about responsibility and guilt is impossible in the German context. This would be similar in countries like France or Poland, which have struggled with their legacies of resistance, rescue and victimhood on the one hand, and collaboration on the other. [28]

Britain, conversely, was one of only few European countries neither occupied by, nor collaborating with, Nazi Germany (apart from the Channel Islands). Its wartime experiences and memories of the war and the Holocaust are therefore markedly different from those of formerly occupied countries and, of course, Germany or Italy. The British war effort and the "Battle of Britain" have long been part of Britain's and particularly England's cultural memory (e.g., CONNELLY, 2004). The Holocaust has become part of official memory and visual culture since the 1980s, and especially since the 2000s (PEARCE, 2014). The topic was implemented as part of the English national history curriculum (1991), while the permanent Holocaust exhibition in London's Imperial War Museum opened in 2000. Britain has also played a leading role in the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (now the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#)) since the [Stockholm Declaration](#), most notably with the establishment of an annual [Holocaust Memorial Day](#) (HMD) in 2001, and recently (2015) the [UK Holocaust Commission](#), and plans to build a national [UK Holocaust Memorial](#). Rather than constitute a contested past, in Britain, the Holocaust is seen through the lens of British values, with a focus on the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and the rescue of Jewish children on the *Kindertransports*. [29]

In the last two to three decades, however, the country's relationship to the Holocaust has also come under increased academic scrutiny. Scholars have brought to the fore the restrictions to Jewish immigration to Britain and Palestine; the government's inaction in light of reports on crimes committed against the Jews in continental Europe; and the post-war redefinition of the British engagement and its uses for the present (e.g., CESARANI & LEVINE, 2000; KUSHNER, 1994, 2008; see also SHARPLES & JENSEN, 2013). Important

research is being undertaken in the area of Holocaust education. Studies established that both documentaries and feature films, including *The World at War*, *The Nazis: A Warning from History*,<sup>10</sup> and *Schindler's List*, are widely used by English teachers in the classroom, whose own subject knowledge about the Holocaust was overall limited (GRAY, 2011; PETTIGREW et al., 2009). The CfHE's recent empirical study with 8,000 English pupils has further highlighted significant gaps in knowledge and understanding, the role played by popular culture for misconceptions, and the predominance and persistence of a "lessons" based approach to Holocaust education (FOSTER et al., 2016). [30]

## 4. Results

I will now demonstrate how the study's comparative approach can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of individual reception, and particularly the impact of films being based on either "true events" or fictional narratives, and the role played by extra-textual factors. For this purpose, I will discuss and compare responses to, and interpretations of, three distinct modes of representation: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, a film based on a fiction novel, and which strays furthest from the historical record in its attempt at telling a universal story; *The Grey Zone*'s realist approach to Holocaust representation as the most graphic, relentless and indeed realistic representation of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz-Birkenau (the more recent *Son of Saul*<sup>11</sup> notwithstanding), which was based on multiple sources; and finally *Defiance*, which sits somewhere between the two. Based on a "true story" and the research by Nechama TEC (1993), both its content—Jewish resistance—and its mode of representation, part action and part melodrama, are highly unusual for a "Holocaust film". I will also refer to interviews about the other two films (*Conspiracy* and *The Reader*) to draw out wider conclusions. In addition, I will discuss viewers' memories of *Schindler's List*, which around seventy per cent were familiar with, to reflect on the potential longer-term impact of Holocaust films. [31]

### 4.1 "True stories"

Films using the label "based on a true story"—and especially if using a realist aesthetic—commanded more authority than the films based on fiction. Among interviewees, who had watched *The Grey Zone*, the film's authenticity and factuality was rarely in question due to its realist style. Libby SAXTON notes in this respect that the film's "meticulous reconstruction unsettles the distinctions between documentary and fiction" (2008, p.83). Its grim, relentless, brutal and violent tone and look found particular appreciation as a realistic portrayal among interviewees, for example, by comparing it favourably to other films. Among them was Ryan (administrator, 46), who voiced his clear preference for *The Grey Zone*

10 Documentaries: *The World at War* (UK, 1973-74) was an ITV/Thames Television production, consisting of 26 episodes, produced by James ISAACS; *The Nazis: A Warning from History* (UK, 1997), a six-part BBC production, was directed by Laurence REES.

11 *Son of Saul* (Hungary, 2015) was directed by László NEMES and won several awards. Like *The Grey Zone*, it is set around the time of the *Sonderkommando* uprising, while its lead protagonist tries to give a boy, who is killed by the Nazis after surviving the gas, a burial.

over *Schindler's List*.<sup>12</sup> He appreciated the former film for being "less glossy" and more "downbeat" rather than "uplifting" or with "a happy ending", which made it feel more "authentic". Ryan also cited "Hollywood", which functions as signifying something negative, and less realistic. He saw *The Grey Zone* on a par with *Fateless* and documentary *Shoah* in that they reflect the "reality of the Holocaust better" (Interview RG, 2011, lines 88-95).<sup>13</sup> [32]

Both the attempt at saving a girl, who survived the gas, and resistance featured prominently in the interviews about *The Grey Zone*. For many, the finding of the girl confuses or distracts from the uprising. Noel (porter, 58), who was one of three interviewees with some prior knowledge about Jewish resistance, summarised the film at the beginning of the interview as being about a rebellion. He pointed to the *Sonderkommando*'s predicament and their "hopeless condition", favouring "rebellion" over allegedly accepting one's fate "meekly" (Interview NB, 2011, lines 3-9). This points to the myth of Jewish passivity and the privileging of armed resistance, which was also seen in interviews about *Defiance*, which features the group's internal strife over whether armed struggle is more important than saving lives. To Noel, *The Grey Zone*'s story of the men finding the girl detracts from the uprising, and he wondered whether this aspect was "factual". In fact, the uprising and the finding of the girl, which was written about by NYISZLI (2012 [1960]), did not coincide. The girl was found alive some time prior to the uprising and was shot dead soon afterwards. NELSON (2003, pp.155-156) conflates the two events for dramatic reasons. Some viewers are, therefore, capable of identifying elements of a film, which have been invented or altered, and especially if they possess over a degree of knowledge about the Holocaust. [33]

While *The Grey Zone* may be commendable for its unflinching portrayal of the *Sonderkommando*'s predicament, its quest to explore the human condition, moral ambiguity and compromise, and what people will do to survive, may well prove to be beyond most viewers' interpretative repertoire. These issues were discussed in all interviews, but many interviewees struggled, to varying degrees and depending on their subject knowledge, with the situation and ambiguous behaviour of the men of the *Sonderkommando*. Siobhan (shop assistant, 20) (SW), who seemed deeply impressed by the film, was the only one who could not comprehend at all how the men could have acted the way they did. She repeatedly voiced her disapproval of their actions and affirmed that she would have acted differently. The following sequence is taken from the group interview between her, Sarah (SA), Jayne (JO) and D.G. (DG), when the group was asked towards the beginning of the interview how they liked the film. The example highlights the communication process and dynamics within the group and the different positions the interviewees are occupying:

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12 I use interviewees' first names only for better readability. Where requested by the interviewees, names were made anonymous and pseudonyms were assigned.

13 *Fateless* (Germany/Hungary/UK, 2005) was directed by Lajos KOLTAI, and is based on the novel "Sorstalanság" (lit. "Fatelessness") by Imre KERTÉSZ (1992 [1975]); *Shoah* (France, 1985), a nine and a half hour documentary, was directed by Claude LANZMANN and consists of interviews with Holocaust survivors, witnesses and perpetrators.

"SW: I've never really watched anything like that before, so that was new to me. ||  
INT: Mm-hmm. ||| But I've heard about it and stuff in school but I've never watched  
anything about it and I think it would like, it's opened me eyes a bit to it, || INT: Mm-  
hmm. ||| I've never actually realised how bad it was. ...

JO: It ... showed how the Germans really, well, not Germans, the Nazis as they were,  
er, just took control of everything 'cause they also made, to me, they also was making  
the, erm, (-) certain Jews kill Jews, || SA: Mm-hmm. ||| you know, they didn't, you  
know, they, they was forcing them to do it but it, you know, and it's just, they were  
making them do it, if they didn't do it, they would kill them, wouldn't they? || SA: Mm-  
hmm. |||

SW: It does make you think though why they did it because they were gonna get  
killed anyway, so rather than, I did agree with what the one man was saying about,  
erm, at least they'll die with dignity, || JO: Mm-hmm. ||| that is not making people do \_.  
I, I'd never be able to do anything like that, that would, go against my own people to  
get in with ano-, no.

JO: ... like, erm, DG said, it was a good representation of what did happen during that  
time, er, you know, and what they, this was the power they [the Nazis] got over  
people to do it" (Group interview SW, SA, JO & DG, 2011, lines 16-31). [34]

Throughout the group discussion, Sarah (student, 48) and Jayne (shop assistant, 52), who had some prior knowledge about the *Sonderkommandos*, frequently stressed how the men were forced to do their "work" and that they would be killed by the Germans otherwise. Their existing knowledge may have enabled them to make sense of the situation and behaviour of the *Sonderkommando* whereas Siobhan, who had very little knowledge about the Holocaust, approached the film from a different perspective and seemed unable to either comprehend or empathise with their situation. At the same time, the example above also shows that Jayne had to search for words initially before being able to express that the men were forced to work in the crematoria. *The Grey Zone* can pose difficulties for audiences, who may be unaccustomed to both an un-heroic and ambiguous depiction of Jewish Holocaust victims, and therefore struggle to contextualise what is presented to them within the framework of their own morality and familiar images (LANGER, 1991, pp.26-27). Siobhan's statement above is in sharp contrast to Noel, for example, who acknowledged that "unless you're placed in that situation, you don't know what you would do" when he was asked how the Jewish inmates were represented (Interview NB, 2011, lines 212-13). NELSON's film may thus be intelligible in the way he intended, mainly to those with a certain level of knowledge about the Holocaust and familiarity with other representations. At the same time, *The Grey Zone* did prompt many of the interviewees to think about the *Sonderkommando* and in some cases, introduced them to this particular aspect of the Holocaust for the first time. [35]

There are other potential consequences of the film's focus on the actions and choices of the *Sonderkommando*, while leaving the SS largely in the background. Around half of the interviewees compared the *Sonderkommando* men to the Nazis. One of them was Oscar (student, 21), who emphasised, when asked for his thoughts on the representation of the Jews in *The Grey Zone*, that it "is one of

the first films I've seen that deals with the Jews as actually being perpetrators themselves, erm, and acting more savagely in some cases than the Germans in the film", arguing that this "sheds a new light on the Holocaust" (Group interview DL, LS & OS, 2011, lines 51-5). Oscar and others, who interpreted the film in this way, do not seem to grasp the concept of the "grey zone" put forward by Primo LEVI (1989 [1986], p.25), that is, the exploration of the "space which separates ... the victims from the perpetrators". Instead, they implicitly equated the situation of victims and perpetrators notwithstanding their fundamental differences. For those who neither have knowledge of nor interest in the subject, *The Grey Zone* could leave them with the impression that the Jewish inmates and their persecutors were, in essence, in the same situation. This kind of victim-perpetrator inversion was unique to responses to *The Grey Zone*. [36]

Interviewees' responses to *Defiance* were decidedly more mixed, reflecting its position between realist and fictional modes of representation. Several interviewees placed *Defiance* within the tradition of American or Hollywood films, which they regarded as big productions eschewing the use of subtitles, relying on Hollywood tropes, and bearing a danger of trivialisation. But even though *Defiance* was criticised for its action film aesthetics by many interviewees, it still seemed realistic enough to add to their knowledge about the Holocaust. The film is set almost entirely outside the ghettos and camps, which have come to dominate the screens and the popular imagination regarding the Holocaust. The majority of interviewees had no prior knowledge about Jewish partisans, the Nazi killing squads or Jews hiding in the forests of Eastern Europe/Russia, prior to watching the film. Resistance, fighting, and defiance were among the most-discussed topics. Interviewees held that the general historical background it depicted—including Jewish resistance, and the representation of the Russians and the female partisans—was authentic or factual. Among them was Maud (student, 46), whom I asked if she had learned anything by watching this film:

"Yes 'cause ... I didn't realise that they lived out in the woods. I knew that the ghettos had been cleared but just assumed that they would go straight to Auschwitz or whichever one so I didn't realise that x-number of them had ... got out and lived in woods and, I think it said twelve hundred ... that's a good number" (Interview MS, lines 58-61). [37]

Maud's response also indicates the role played by the text usually displayed at the beginning and/or end of films based on "true events". Viewers take note of it, and its content is not in question. This type of signposting contributes to lending such films a certain air of authenticity and factuality. The lack of knowledge about the events depicted or referenced in *Defiance* and *The Grey Zone*, meanwhile, is not limited to the interviewees about this film, but fits with the CfHE's findings. According to their research, the topic of the mass killings outside the camps is among the least likely to be taught in English schools, while there is an overwhelming focus on Auschwitz (PETTIGREW et al., 2009, p.42), though presumably not on the Jewish *Sonderkommando*, who are not mentioned in their report. Among pupils, the more recent study (FOSTER et al., 2016) found only around 25 per cent knew about mobile killing squads and their relationship to the



Holocaust (p.194). Pupils' accounts rarely mentioned, or did not "prioritise", Jewish resistance (p.51). [38]

#### 4.2 Between fact and fiction

The films based on fiction, but also *Defiance* with its highly dramatized and emotionalised representation, were assessed by viewers not primarily, or solely, for their fidelity to the historical record or facts. Instead, the interviewees of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *The Reader*, and *Defiance* separated a core of truth from artistic embellishments, or judged the films to be emotionally authentic, or plausible. In a group interview about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, David (freelance dance teacher, 26) argued that it was "emotionally authentic":

"I think they tried to be as authentic as they can in a sense, or not authentic, authentic like intellectually or factually, more emotionally, that, that's how they tried to be authentic, so they've got the set together, they've got the stage together and the narrative and it's been about how the different characters respond to it emotionally, that's the authentic bit that they're trying to get across, the emotional response, so I think that factually it probably wasn't that authentic, but emotionally it was quite close" (Group Interview DT, PT & AC, 2011, lines 284-293). [39]

In interviews about *Defiance*, we find this notion of emotional authenticity too, resulting from the film's seeming ability to create a sense of the story happening now, of drawing the viewers in to experience the story with the characters. [40]

Interviewees about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *The Reader* often explicitly distinguished between a core of "truth" (DONESON, 2002, p.181), such as the general historical background and context, and artistic embellishments. One of them was Ruth (artist and educator, 64) who was asked to elaborate why she thought it was not important for this film to be "realistic". Ruth argued that it was "very clear ... where the poetic license ... has been taken ... the fundamental truths of the film remain ... in the important areas it was realistic" (Interview RJ, 2011, lines 40-2). For her, it appeared to suffice for historical realism that the film showed core facts, namely, that "the camps existed, that people were ... killed and burnt ... in the ovens", that there was "brutality", and that "people were coerced out of fear". While she had doubts regarding some details, for example, that the commandant's house "would have been quite so close to the extermination" (though, in fact, the house of the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß, was within the camp complex), she called upon her historical knowledge and remembered to have heard "that people in the villages could smell the burning bodies" (lines 44-48). What she judged to be realistic was information taken from her existing knowledge rather than anything new conveyed by the film. The film was understood as being authentic in terms of core facts, which were distinguished from artistic embellishments. To some viewers, films can capture "truth" without having to be faithful to every historical detail. This is particularly the case with films that remain vague about the specific historical context, and merely reference some Holocaust iconography. Viewers then fill in the gaps by means of their existing knowledge and understanding. [41]

The aforementioned CfHE study on pupils' responses to this film echoes these findings. Students were "aware of the more glaring historical inaccuracies of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*—they know it is a (historical) fiction—but they still see it as, in the words of several respondents, 'truthful'" (FOSTER et al., 2016, p.93). Given a range of misconceptions and a lack of in-depth subject knowledge identified by the CfHE and reflected in interviewees' responses in the present study, the question is, of course, what kind of "truth" it is that they refer to. Perhaps due to the perception of emotional authenticity or a core of truth, four interviewees of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and seven in the case of *The Reader* thought the films were or could be based on, or inspired by, "true stories". Interestingly, this was much less the case in the CfHE study, where only one out of 44 pupils thought that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was based on actual events (p.91). It remains elusive whether this is merely coincidental, or due to the latter study's focus group discussion setting, the pupils' recent or on-going Holocaust education, or their more likely familiarity with the fiction novel the film is based on. [42]

On the one hand, interviewees were ready to look beyond embellishments, and separate fiction from "truth" in films based on fictional narratives. On the other hand, they expected "true stories" to employ fewer artistic devices, which may be why *Defiance* was criticised the most—not so much for *what* it portrayed than *how* it was portrayed. The interviews about *Defiance* stood out for many references to aspects of the representation—e.g., revenge, internal disputes within the group, the brothers' falling-out, the fighting scenes—as relatable and plausible, and thus authentic, even though these were often precisely the elements altered or exaggerated by the filmmakers for dramatic purposes. But interviewees about *Defiance* also criticised a wide range of aspects which they felt were merely adhering to cinematic conventions and tropes. Preconceptions based on existing subject knowledge, other representations, or personal experiences, were key interpretative strategies. In the case of *Defiance* and *Conspiracy*, interviewees would draw on other representations—films and books, not always about the Holocaust—to make sense of the films, much more so than was the case among interviewees of the other three films. Perhaps an overall lack of subject knowledge about the stories portrayed met with a plethora of intertextual references in the films. Different types of preconceptions help viewers authenticate what they see on screen, and offset at least some of the films' potential impacts. All but one interviewee highlighted inauthentic aspects in *Defiance*. This included criticism of the film's format and genre. Those interviewees who possessed some knowledge on the subject tended to focus on the historical accuracy of the film, whereas others concentrated on cinematic tropes. For Howard (PhD candidate, 25), for example, it was the recognition of tropes and formulae that enabled him to doubt the authenticity of certain aspects of *Defiance*. Howard argued that:

"There's no blurred lines, there's no grey areas if you make it a ... biblical story, we make it about good versus evil, we make it like *Star Wars* or something, you know, it, it fits it into this kind of narrative of, of any sort of great story, it's the ... victory of good

against all the odds ... against evil ... I'm not sure how useful that is for historical understanding ..." (Interview HP, 2011, lines 22-6). [43]

Howard likened *Defiance* to *Star Wars*<sup>14</sup> and other Manichean narratives that are very clear-cut and celebratory but that may not necessarily aid historical understanding. The film's use of, and references to, biblical and epic or classic stories made the constructed nature of the narrative more transparent for Howard. Similarly, Theodore (police constable, 27), when asked for a comparison of *Defiance* with other films on the subject, proposed that its setting outside the ghettos did not reflect the "gritty" truth and the "futility of life as a Jew" in the German sphere of influence. Theodore highlighted that stories of survival as depicted in *Defiance* were rare. To him, the film was therefore less effective than other films in bringing across the essence of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust (Group interview JT & TR, 2011, lines 385-91). [44]

Given the popularity of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, the kind of emotional understanding the film may invoke or tap into, warrants further investigation. Marketed as a "timeless story of innocence lost and humanity found", all interviewees who watched this film took up its themes of childhood innocence, naivety, and ignorance. Bruno and the mother were their focal points, with Bruno, in particular, being regarded as a victim by most. The childhood motif led to an increased focus on Bruno whose death was of greater concern to most interviewees than that of the Jewish boy, Shmuel. Both the mother's initial ignorance of the crimes and the grandmother's disapproval of Nazism, fuelled interpretations that the Germans in general did not know about the crimes, or were indeed opposed to them. [45]

The predominant focus on Bruno or his mother, and the portrayal of these characters, and non-Jewish Germans at the time more generally, as victims was very common in the present study. For Sam (student, 19), for example, the scene he remembered most was that of Bruno's mother crying at the end when she realises that her son was killed. The "complete dehumanising horror" (Interview SC, 2012, line 279) of the Holocaust was expressed by the pain of the mother, whose husband was responsible for running the very machinery that—accidentally—killed their son. In this reading, the film becomes a lesson about the cost of war to all of those involved without indication of cause-effect relationships or distinctions between victims and perpetrators. This trend towards universal lessons found manifold expression in the interviews about this film. Most popular and most frequently named were interpretations that all people are the same. This was the case, for example, in an individual interview with Anna (research assistant, 30), who was asked whether she would take anything away from the film. She cited "the innocence of children ... to them everyone's the same, it's the adults that there's differences that they, they put between people ... that's the general message" (Interview AS, 2011, lines 194-95). This line of representation and interpretation fits well with what Donald BLOXHAM (2003, p.47) has termed

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14 *Star Wars* is a franchise of science fiction films beginning with George LUCAS's *Star Wars* (USA, 1977).

the "pathos approach" to Holocaust education in relation to Britain's Holocaust Memorial Day. [46]

The potentially problematic conclusions that can be drawn from the film are further highlighted in the following passage. I asked Sam if he thought that the film held a "message for today":

"Yeah, pretty much, erm, don't let your kids climb under fences ... I suppose, try to explain these things, like kind of bad things in the world to your children, don't keep them in a complete innocence ... He didn't know what was wrong with going ... to the other side ... if he had known, maybe he would have been a bit more standoffish but then you kind of think, well, the fence, that, that whole thing shouldn't have existed anyway, the concentration camps, so it's, it shouldn't have existed and he, like as a child, shouldn't have to know about it, shouldn't have to be burdened with these kind of terrible, terrible events and emotions and stuff, so it's, it's, I don't know, it's very hard to reconcile what I think towards the movie, I think" (Interview SC, 2012, lines 347-58). [47]

The arguably loaded question that I asked him, which presupposed that the film does indeed have a "message", did not surprise Sam. His response was immediate and detailed. It reflects what David CESARANI warned of in relation to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: that Bruno's death "becomes less a consequence of prejudice and more a bizarre health and safety incident. If Bruno had been properly instructed about the camp (as would have been the case in reality) he would not have gone inside" (2008, n.p.). Sam realised that this "message" is flawed as the concentration camps "shouldn't have existed", but his concern is, nonetheless, reserved for Bruno (as the one that should not be burdened) rather than Shmuel. Ruth GILBERT argues in this respect with regards to the novel that a "perhaps unintended effect" of the "enforced identification with Bruno" may be that at the end, "we are supposed to be somehow devastated, along with the Nazi commandant, that the wrong boy died" (2010, p.364). Among the English pupils interviewed by the CfHE, we similarly find "a perspective of widespread German ignorance of the Holocaust" and "a marked tendency to shift their locus of concern from the victims of the Holocaust onto the bystanders and even, to some extent, to the perpetrators" (FOSTER et al., 2016, p.97). [48]

#### 4.3 Interpretative communities

Viewers of Holocaust films are not passive consumers, but active audiences, who negotiate the meaning of a film in relation to what they see, know, and experience. A film's impact is mediated by viewers' belonging to various interpretative communities and subject positions, such as gender and political attitudes. The extent, to which the interviewees' Britishness may have informed their reception, can be gauged when looking further at their responses to the films' depiction of Nazi perpetrators and "bystanders". Interviewees took up specific interpretations offered by the films, and especially if these resonated with preconceptions. Their interpretations included alcohol abuse in *The Grey Zone* (e.g., interpreted as a coping mechanism for the SS guards) or propaganda in

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (e.g., to explain the mother's or Bruno's ignorance about the camps, which was also seen in the CfHE's study of pupil responses to the film). *The Reader* does not feature anything about propaganda, but interviewees of this film nonetheless frequently cited Nazi propaganda as a reason or motivation for Germans to participate in crimes or turn a blind eye. This discrepancy between film text and interpretation can only be made sense of when considering interviewees' preconceived understandings. The following example from an interview about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* further highlights this. Emma (student, 18) was asked for her thoughts about the director's intentions:

"I think, erm, throughout the film it's key that ... not everyone knew what was going on or that some people put up with it and ... maybe (---) also that they didn't, they (-) sort of, the brainwashing, erm, sort of (--) distanced them from the emotions because, erm, they thought Jews were not hu-, not humans, or they thought they were vermin and ... caused ... the Great War ... so effective brainwashing and ... maybe, erm, showing how (---) this, people can commit such atrocities but also ... contrasting that with the child who doesn't understand and isn't, isn't as subject to the brainwashing as much because it doesn't understand ..." (Interview EB, 2011, lines 104-111). [49]

Emma both reproduced language and tropes from the film ("they thought Jews were not humans", "they thought they were vermin and ... caused the Great War") and drew on her preconceptions of Germans' knowledge about the crimes and notions of "brainwashing" and being "distanced" from emotions, indicating the interplay of film text and viewer preconceptions. [50]

By far the most widespread explanation of perpetrator and bystander behaviour and motivation was the supposition of fear and coercion. Such interpretations were often extended to the historical perpetrators and "bystanders". While the films' representations certainly encouraged such interpretations, I maintain that we can only understand them by taking viewers' existing knowledge and beliefs into account. In other words, without resonating with, or connecting to, some preconceived ideas and understandings, a film is unlikely to have much of an impact. Links to wider trends in British society and culture play an important role in this context. Thomas McKAY demonstrates in his oral history study of intergenerational memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust in England, that explanations of perpetrator motivation with fear, coercion and propaganda are widespread and thus not merely linked to films. There was also

"the belief that there was a fanatical elite, the Nazis, who carry the burden and responsibility for the Holocaust and the vast majority of the rest of the German nation who were compelled to, and were only acting under, strict orders from above" (2012, p.189). [51]

The CfHE teacher and pupil research results reflect such sentiments, too (FOSTER et al., 2016; PETTIGREW et al., 2009). In my study, the generalisations about Germans, "bystanders" and perpetrators, tended to be positive and interviewees attempted to find mitigating circumstances. Such responses were possibly affected by my German background, which all

interviewees were aware of, resulting e.g., in being more polite, but I identified only a few explicit examples of this. As many of the responses provided by the interviewees, especially regarding exculpatory perceptions of German perpetrators and bystanders, echo McKAY's findings (2012, esp. pp.185-194), the overall impact of my nationality appeared to be only minor. Rather, they express much more widespread perceptions of National Socialist perpetrators in Britain. At the same time, the fact that certain interpretations were tied to some films more so than others, does suggest that there is still a close relationship between film text and film interpretation. At the very least, the films encouraged or triggered certain interpretations, and they resonated with preconceptions and knowledge obtained elsewhere. [52]

The significance of gender, age, education and political attitudes for the effects of media influences has been examined in a number of empirical, quantitative studies (BAUMERT et al., 2008, p.45). Qualitative approaches can illuminate some of the mechanisms of this in practice (e.g., READING, 2002, pp.158-59). For example, the widespread characterisation of the character of Hanna as a victim in interviews about *The Reader* may be linked to the majority of the respondents being female, and therefore a potentially increased likelihood of empathetic identification with this film character. Another indicator for the significance of gender was seen in interviews about *The Grey Zone*, where the female film characters, and especially them being tortured, were discussed by all of the female interviewees, but none of the male respondents. A more explicit link between gender and film reception is expressed in the following passage, which suggests gendered notions and expectations of empathy. Asked about the mother's development in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Barbara (retiree, 58) responded:

"I think ... some of the scales were removed from her eyes, erm, but ... she was a mother and at the end, erm, ultimately ... she'd seen the little boy, Shmuel, come in and knew that he was in the camp, she didn't have that motherly feeling towards him and what he might be going through in the camp but ... obviously she was distraught when her own son was exterminated by accident in the camp but, erm, that was just because it was something that happened to her own son and she wasn't thinking about it in terms of, this is happening to thousands of children every week, or every day, you know ..." (Interview BP, 2011, lines 84-91). [53]

Barbara's critique of the mother's character emphasised that the mother's empathy was reserved for her own family. This example points to possibly gendered notions of empathy as Barbara would appear to expect a "motherly feeling" resulting from having a child to extend to more than just the mother's own family. During the interview, Barbara also talked about her own daughter, which could indicate that being a mother herself, she linked her own experience to the mother in the film. Barbara was also the most vocal critic of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and its focus on Bruno rather than Shmuel and the other Jewish victims. She was friends with a Holocaust survivor, and had herself suffered from anti-Semitic and racist abuse. As someone personally affected by prejudice and discrimination, and with a personal connection to a survivor, she was, perhaps,

less inclined to empathise with a character like Bruno and more likely to reject *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas's* portrayal of German victimhood. [54]

Finally, we can see how prejudice and stereotypes directly impacted on film reception. As mentioned above, for many interviewees, *Defiance* raised awareness about Jewish resistance. Among them was Howard, who conceded that he was

"genuinely curious about this story of the Jewish partisan resistance. That's really interesting, erm, and something ... I've never thought about so ... I admit to being guilty of this ... when I was saying this ... representation of the Jews as entirely passive in their own extermination" (Interview HP, 2011, lines 393-397). [55]

Despite being overall critical of *Defiance* and cinematic representations of the Holocaust more generally, what Howard nonetheless took from the film was a core of historical fact—the existence of Jewish resistance—and to question his own knowledge. By contrast, Andrew (retiree, 63), who was the most critical of the film, conformed to and defended, rather than challenged, the myth of passivity. When asked about key scenes in the film, he cited a scene in which the Russian commander of another group of partisans claims that Jews "are only good for dying". Andrew argued that the Jews "did not rise up, like there's a few isolated instances, but they did not rise up against the oppressor, they allowed themselves to be put upon and downtrodden and repressed and murdered and ... they lost their dignity" (Interview AL, 2012, lines 141-5). He connected one of the scenes in the film with his knowledge and preconceptions and interpreted it in a way that confirmed and consolidated rather than overrode his existing views. The anti-Semitic stereotypes, and problematic notions of alleged Jewish complicity in their own deaths, which he reproduces are stronger than the film, which he largely dismisses. He presented himself as an expert on the subject and did not reflect—at any point in the interview—on, or question, his knowledge. The level of criticism levelled against a film was thus most pronounced among interviewees who held strong beliefs, political attitudes, or were reminded of personal experiences. Notably, Andrew was not the only one among the interviewees who expressed such sentiments. Six others made comments as part of their film interpretations that tended to centre on myths of Jewish wealth and power, and "Jewish" appearance, and even included the claim by one that the Jews allegedly murdered Christ. In lieu of in-depth subject knowledge, some viewers fall back on other ideas, including prejudices and stereotypes. [56]

#### 4.4 Remembering Schindler's List

Whatever their short-term impact, interviewees' memories of films seen in the past tended to be vague and centred around emotional impact or attachment to a particular character. The focus of the study was on immediate responses to Holocaust films, but interviewees also spoke about other films they had seen, either in response to my question to this effect, or by way of comparison with the film under discussion. *Schindler's List* was the film which was named most often: at least 48 of 68 interviewees were familiar with it (the younger participants were

less likely to have seen it), and between them referred to the film on 73 separate occasions. Few, however, were able to recall many details about the film. More than a quarter of them, for example, remembered the film mainly for the emotional impact it had had on them. One of them was Faith (IT support officer, 29), who referred to *Schindler's List* as one of the sources of her knowledge or awareness, when asked where she had learned about the Holocaust:

"... one of the big movies that ... got what I'd say widely published and lots of people learned about the Holocaust has to be ... *Schindler's List* || INT: Mm-hmm. ||| and obviously the, the little girl with the little red jacket, very well done. <clears throat> And ... I think a lot people cried at that one, I think everyone cried <laughs> at that movie.

INT: Do you still remember that point when you saw the, the girl in the red coat?

FJ: Yes. Yeah, I, I've got quite a bad memory, but ... that I remember especially at the end where it's on the conveyor-belt ... very cleverly done, yeah" (Interview FJ, 2011, lines 130-136). [57]

What she remembered most or what came to her mind first, was the girl in the red coat and her assumption how "everyone" reacted, that is, by crying, which she seemingly remarked in a self-consciously joking manner. She erroneously located this scene, which, along with the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto before, is crucial to *Schindler's* transformation in the second half of the film, "at the end". The emotional impact of the scene appeared to have been strong enough that Faith, who confessed to a "bad memory", can still remember it almost 20 years later. Juliane FINGER and Hans-Ulrich WAGNER (2014) also argue that the long-term impact of the documentary TV programming surrounding the third Majdanek Trial<sup>15</sup> on the older participants of their study was partly due to emotional responses to particular programmes at the time (p.344). This, in turn, would suggest that fiction and documentary films may have, to an extent, a similar impact. If strong emotions are experienced in relation to a film, this can be remembered even many years later. The experience of watching the film becomes part of the viewer's own autobiographical memory (p.340). [58]

A more normative account of *Schindler's List's* emotional impact was given by Andrew, who contrasted *Defiance* with *Schindler's List*. Asked for his definition of a "Holocaust film" (which he had denied *Defiance* was), he responded:

"I think a Holocaust film is a film which would make the, the viewer emotionally attached and, and emotionally affected ... and you sit down at the end as the credits roll and, and you are touched in your heart and your soul and you feel that was something, a powerful experience, something which has deeply affected me and something which has changed my life ... a bit like *Schindler's List* which I've, at the end you think, 'wow, that, that's, that's possibly how it was' " (Interview AL, 2012, lines 13-19). [59]

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15 Between 1975 and 1981, sixteen former members of the SS, who were among the personnel at the Majdanek concentration and death camp, stood trial in Düsseldorf, Germany. The first two Majdanek trials took place in Lublin, Poland, in 1944, and from 1946 to 1948.



Andrew had a very clear definition of a "Holocaust film" which also came with a set of expectations. *Schindler's List* serves as a yardstick in terms of emotional impact and, perhaps, cathartic experience, by which other films are measured. The same was true for those who argued that most films about the Holocaust were more or less similar. *Schindler's List* served as an example for films that show the Holocaust from a similar (presumably, victim-centred) perspective, providing the same information over and over again. Andrew's response also points to the perception of *Schindler's List* as authentic ("that's possibly how it was") as compared to *Defiance*, even though both films are representations that took significant artistic liberties. One can also assume from this example, that after watching *Schindler's List*, Andrew did not seek any additional information about the historical context: *Schindler's List's* historical accuracy is not in question for him. At the same time, in Andrew's view, watching a film does not necessarily have to be educational, but should be a life-changing, emotional experience. *Schindler's List's* impact or indeed legacy possibly lies in providing a frame of reference for judging other representations of the Holocaust. For the viewers of *Hotel Rwanda*, interviewed by GUDEHUS et al. (2010), it was also *Schindler's List* that was the film mostly referred to, e.g., by comparing Paul RUSESABAGINA, the hotelier who saved the lives of more than one thousand people during the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, which is depicted by *Hotel Rwanda*, to Oskar SCHINDLER. The film thus serves as a frame of reference both for films about the Holocaust and other genocides. However, GUDEHUS et al. note, "the comparisons are often very short ('that is like in *Schindler's List*') and have a more associative character than an exemplary, explicative function" (p.357). "Whether *Schindler's List* really has such a strong influence on the interpretation of National Socialism, as is generally accepted", they argue further, is "not yet proven. Possibly, it was so successful and the subject of so much debate precisely because it aligned so perfectly with the dominant modes of interpretation and thus delivered illustrative material" (p.359). [60]

Andrew was not alone in expressing certain expectations regarding films about the Holocaust. A sense that such films should not be made to make money or provide entertainment (a charge mainly levelled at *Defiance*), and that they should be watched for education or memory, was widespread. Interviewees about *Defiance* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* talked about entertainment or enjoyment in relation to the film, which was rejected or justified by many, including those who admitted their enjoyment of the film. For example, in relation to the latter film, Sam explained that he

"did quite enjoy the movie, er, in a morose kind of way, not like a joke, 'ha ha, this is good, this is funny', and more of a kind of, erm, 'it's interesting', it was, it's emotive, it's heartfelt, you know, like, it's hard not to feel anything towards it ... and then you kind of think, 'this actually happened, this isn't just movie kind of stuff', and that gives it that extra kind of zing in the movie" (Interview SC, 2012, lines 46-52). [61]

Genre, therefore, clearly has an impact on understanding and expectations. But whereas GUDEHUS et al. (2010, p.360) suggested that "perception is much more genre-specific (e.g., action film) than theme-specific (genocide)", the

findings here indicate that "Holocaust films" come to be understood as a genre in its own right by viewers, and come with a set of expectations, both towards the films and towards themselves as viewers. [62]

Finally, I want to highlight two additional examples as they point to an important aspect not addressed by other studies. Two of the interviewees who talked about *Schindler's List*, Rachel (accountant, 33) and Martin (probation officer, 64), who were interviewed individually about *Conspiracy*, re-evaluated their initial response to the film. They said that in retrospect, they realised that *Schindler's List* was simply a "representation" (Martin) or that at the time they did not question its "authenticity" or "factual correctness" (Rachel) (Interview MT, 2011, line 115; Interview RC, 2011, line 295). Several similar statements about other films suggest that meanings derived from, or constructed in response to and in relation with films are not static and fixed but are fluid and can change over time, for example, when exposed to other films or information, or even when exposed to the same film for a second time. [63]

## 5. Evaluation

### 5.1 Summary

The study's comparative approach was particularly effective in identifying differences and commonalities in reception between films based on true stories and those based on fictional narratives, and between more realist and more obviously dramatized modes of representation. The findings simultaneously point to the impact of film genre and aesthetics, and the ability of viewers to authenticate a film text using the interpretative strategies at their disposal, while often lacking in-depth subject knowledge to do so effectively. [64]

To be sure, the responses to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* revealed problematic interpretations. Few of these, however, appeared to have come directly from the film but instead resonated with existing ideas. Its impact should therefore not be a foregone conclusion. The warnings issued regarding *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* also ring true for modes of representation scholars may favour. *The Grey Zone*'s realist approach left interviewees grappling with its ambiguous portrayal of the *Sonderkommando*. Only viewers more familiar with the historical background were able to make sense of the representation in ways that did not equate victims and perpetrators. Its realist authority further precluded viewers from questioning its authenticity. Oscillating between the two, *Defiance*'s unusual portrayal of a little-known "true story" of the Holocaust, rich with action, familiar tropes and conventions, led to some of the most pronounced criticism, with simultaneous appreciation of the film's basic story. Viewers were less forgiving of perceived inaccuracies or exaggerations because *Defiance* portrays a "true story" and because it draws on an unusual genre. [65]

We should certainly be clear that the boundary between fact and fiction, no matter a film's format and source text, are fluid. Films about the Holocaust are powerful precisely because they blend known facts with conjecture and outright

invention, and because of audiences' expectations regarding such films. The study is therefore of potential relevance for films about other historical events and phenomena. The comparative approach proved effective in bringing to the fore the role of extra-textual, or contextual, factors such as various preconceptions, national belonging, gender, or anti-Semitic attitudes, for individual film reception, arguably already at the point of reception and regardless of genre or aesthetics. The study's exploratory character further allowed it to gain a glimpse into potential long-term reception. It indicated that even of highly popular films such as *Schindler's List*, little remains of them in viewers' memory by way of detail bar a film's emotional impact, serving as a frame of reference or adding to one's intertextual repertoire. It also appears that the reception and interpretation of a film about the Holocaust is not necessarily fixed, but can change over time, which further complicates ideas about how film reception relates to acquisition of, or conversion into, memory and knowledge. [66]

## 5.2 Limitations and recommendations

The extent to which we think of the interviewees of this study as "ordinary viewers" must be qualified. By virtue of their participation in the study, they are already self-selective, particularly that half of the interviewees who responded to my adverts rather than encouragement of local contacts. The very process of the interviews, that is, viewing a film together with a researcher in a less than comfortable university environment for the purpose of an academic study, hardly resembles the way in which "ordinary viewers" would watch a film at home. The setting and the interview itself would surely cause interviewees to pay more attention to the film than they might do at home or in a cinema, and leave the interview with a more structured, firm memory and interpretation of the film. The small number of interviews, its limited regional focus, and demographic bias further restricts the study's explanatory and theory-building power. Conceptualised as an exploratory study, it still yielded important insights and points the way towards further research, which can address these limitations. [67]

The strong focus on what was important to the interviewees alongside the study's quantitative element, may have resulted in the over-representation of interviews about films which led to particularly rich, detailed, and productive discussions, or that pointed towards patterns of reception rather than the exceptions. Consequently, and contrary to the focus on individual reception, some nuances may be lost in this process. Future research can address this by way of secondary analysis of the data through a different interpretative approach. [68]

For findings regarding the potential long-term reception of films, such as *Schindler's List* in this article, the caveat applies that these were incidental rather than results returned by design. The long-term reception of films, if and how film interpretations change between immediate responses and long-term memory of it, and how people incorporate such responses into their historical understanding and consciousness, needs to be researched using a different, long-term and comparative study design. This could take the form of re-interviewing participants after a period of time, or by way of a questionnaire. [69]

Finally, while I indicated the impact of interpretative communities on Holocaust film reception among the participants of this study, its focus on British interviewees means that no systematic comparison with interviewees from other national contexts was possible. To attain a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between film reception and interpretative community, we also need to consider the intersection with other factors, such as different subject positions or personalities (e.g., readiness or capacity for critical reflection). A bi- or multi-national comparative reception study of one or two films should prove more instructive in this respect. The films to be selected for such a study could reflect more directly on viewers' respective interpretative communities and their relationship to the Holocaust, in order to tease out explicitly how cultural and communicative memory (ASSMANN & CZAPLICKA, 1995) relate to film reception. In the British case, this could be films or documentaries about the *Kindertransports*, the liberation of the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, Allied knowledge about Auschwitz and the Holocaust during the Second World War, or even counter-factual, "alternate" histories about an imagined Nazi occupation or invasion of Britain. [70]

### 5.3 Conclusion

Its limitations notwithstanding, the present study has added both new results and nuance to existing research by virtue of its comparative approach. The findings presented here, and the call for further research, are significant because we still understand too little about individual Holocaust film reception, resulting in skewed ideas about Holocaust films and their audiences. There persists a notion, in pedagogy, the media, and scholarship, that if only the "right" films were made or watched (what these are depends on perspective), then viewers would come away with fewer misconceptions, or with more progressive values, or increased knowledge. [71]

As my study has demonstrated, the dismissal of highly fictionalised and emotionalised modes of representation obscures important differences and similarities in the reception of more factual and fictional modes, and everything in between. The more factual, "true story" based, and realistic Holocaust films are, the more explicitly they add to historical knowledge. They too can convey misconceptions, be rejected by viewers with strong views and preconceptions, and impede criticism by way of their realist aesthetics. Fictional modes, conversely, may also add misconceptions in understanding, but there is evidence that viewers recognise, to varying degrees, inaccuracies and focus on other types of authenticity. A lack of in-depth subject knowledge and limited critical attitude towards Holocaust films compounds these issues. A focus on content, factuality, genre, and aesthetics alone, further obfuscates an understanding of extra-textual and contextual factors. Recognising, and learning more about the impact of preconceptions, subject positions, and other interpretative communities could help, for example, educators prepare students for a more critical and reflexive interaction with Holocaust representations in film and television, and newer technologies. While the film text alone may not be solely responsible for e.g., anti-Semitic interpretations or conceptions of perpetrators as victims, it can

reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs in individuals and society, which should be addressed in research and education. The results of this study remind us that film is but one aspect of popular culture and public history, both fed by and feeding into Holocaust understanding, memory, and consciousness. [72]

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